

## **Vox Populi: A Study on Political Opinions: The Great Charleston Debate, 1858**

Lisa Sproat

University Laboratory High School, Urbana

Teacher: Adele Suslick

Modern-day Charleston is a small university town about one hundred miles east of Springfield. It is home to several Lincoln sites, including a small museum built on the actual spot of the fourth Lincoln-Douglas Debate. The Lincoln-Douglas Debate Museum commemorates the fourth

of seven debates held in 1858 between Lincoln and Douglas. Because it bordered Little Egypt, the pro-slavery part of Illinois, it is surprising that Charleston welcomed



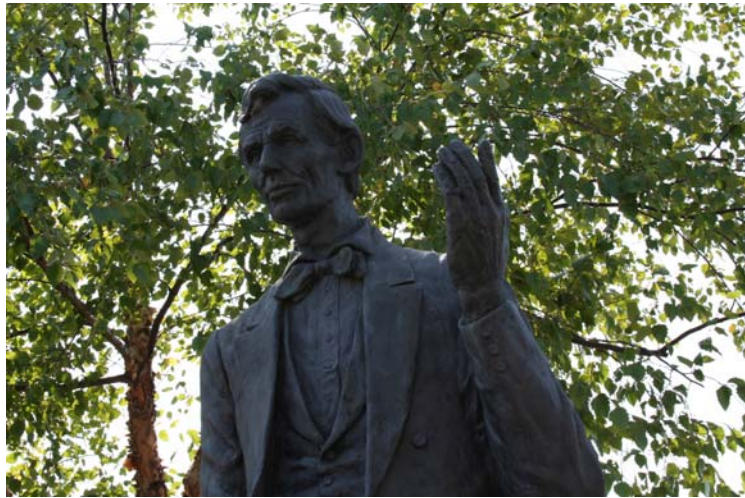
Lincoln-Douglas Debate Museum

the Republican Party so enthusiastically. Lincoln was cheered and applauded by a group of supporters when he arrived in town on September 18, 1858. Douglas, too, had followers waiting for him, but all festivities ceased when, facing a crowd that rivaled Freeport's (the second debate of seven), Lincoln began to speak.

The Charleston debate began with Lincoln dismissing the possibility that African Americans would ever be as free as whites in America. Later in his address, Lincoln invited Orlando Ficklin to the lectern to provide testimony absolving Lincoln from difficulty he had encountered while arguing with Douglas about the Mexican-American

War. (Lincoln had voted against it.) Lincoln hoped Ficklin would back him up, but despite their friendship, Ficklin remained non-committal. Lincoln ended his presentation with an assortment of colorful phrases, surprising many reporters in the audience.

Within a matter of days, biased articles with headlines proclaiming “Lincoln Strips the Giant Dry!” and “Great Rout of the Douglasites!” began to appear throughout the state. The *Weekly Belleville Advocate*, a Republican



paper, ran a story on September 29, 1858 that called Lincoln “our first, last, and only

choice for Senator.” It criticized Douglas by describing his speech as identical to one he had delivered at Elmer’s Hill, and it concluded by praising Lincoln and presenting his closing remarks verbatim, right down to the last shout of “Yes! Yes!” from the



(Model of Crowds at the Debate)

audience. No similar transcription of Douglas's speech ever appeared.

The *Rockford Republican* celebrated Lincoln too. It never mentioned Douglas' warm reception by the audience but focused instead on the thousands who supported Lincoln. The *Chicago Press and Tribune* ran a story criticizing Douglas' inability to draw a crowd and suggested that either the "Douglasites" were "numerically of little importance at the points selected" or Democrats simply did not care for politics. The reporter of this story made it clear that he did not believe in the "stereotyped braggadocio" that "the people are all for Douglas."

The *Prairie Beacon News* of Paris, Illinois, favored Lincoln by publishing a medium-length article about Douglas' banners and the "lies" posted upon them. It even called a Douglasite with a Democratic banner "slow-witted." The article concluded by observing that two-thirds of the crowd supported Lincoln.

Like the *Prairie Beacon News* and the *Chicago Press and Tribune*, the *Weekly North-Western Gazette* published a short synopsis of the debate and claimed that most of the crowd was for Lincoln. One article even likened Lincoln's arguments to a pyramid, which Douglas, despite serious effort, could not move. It also accused Douglas of being so inconsistent that people could not rely on him.

Less is known about the Democratic response to the Charleston debate. Most Democratic states lay further south, and their newspapers covered mostly local issues. It seems likely that the debate was reported more widely by Illinois newspapers, and since the majority of these were Republican, the Democrats received scant coverage.

The *Weekly Bulletin* of Freeport, Illinois, however, did support Douglas although its coverage suggests a less political orientation and casual insults prevail throughout.

The *New York Tribune* also poked fun at Lincoln's appearance, and referred to him as "tall and awkward, with a face of grotesque ugliness," a comment that may have been influenced by a derogatory phrase for Lincoln popular at the time: the Ape from Illinois.

In the end, Douglas won the Senate seat, but people were so favorably impressed by Lincoln that most of them voted for him when he ran for president, proving that "one can win a battle, but lose the war."

Lincoln had the press to thank for that.



(Statue of Stephen Douglas)

*I would like to express my sincere thanks to Professor Vernon Burton of the History Department of the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign for an extremely insightful interview.*

[From "Abraham Lincoln." *Weekly Belleville Advocate* 29 Sept. 1858. *Abraham Lincoln Historical Digitization Project*. 2000. Northern Illinois University.

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## **Photographs**

Lisa Sproat, Lincoln-Douglas Debate Museum. Photograph. 2007. *DeviantArt.com*.

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